

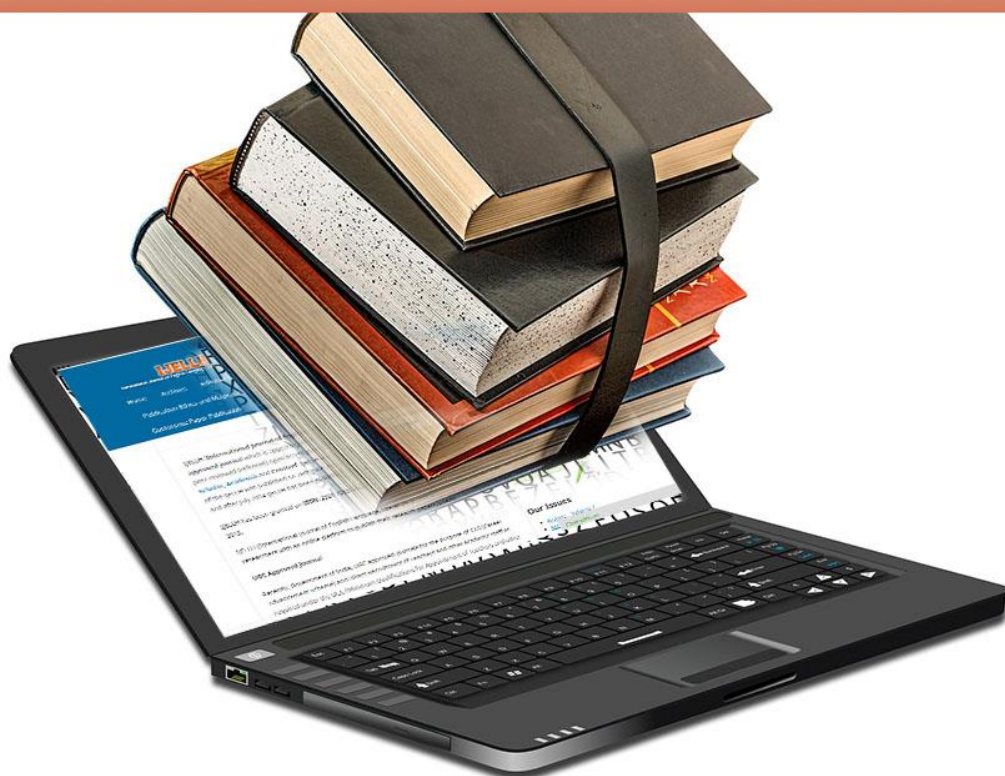
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Ecocritical Undertones of the Conflict between the Landscapes in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*

Abstract

Nature, particularly the landscape, is an important part of the works of Jane Austen. It can be observed that in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, there is a significant relation between the wellbeing of the characters and the landscape they are in. Austen's narrative situates the well-being (happiness) of her characters in the landscape of the countryside and not the city. The town on the other hand, is portrayed with negativity: a place of misfortune. This reveals that Austen exhibits on one hand, a favouritism to the natural landscape i.e. the countryside; and on the other, a deeply entrenched hostility towards the urban/man-made. Austen seems to attribute God-like qualities to the landscape in deciding the fate of each of the characters. This aspect of her narrative in *Sense and Sensibility* is ecocritically analysed in the paper. The paper attempts to delineate the dichotomy in the novel- the joy of the countryside and the misery of the city and justify Austen's narrative as an advocacy of ecocritical life ethics.

Sense and Sensibility is a significant novel in the career of Jane Austen. Its publication marked the emergence of Jane Austen as a commercially successful novelist. The plotline follows the Dashwood family comprising of a mother and her three daughters. It focuses on the romantic lives of the two eldest daughters: Elinor, who is the personification of sense; and Marianne, who is the personification of sensibility. The plot is peppered with references to the scenic beauty of nature. There also seems to be a positive relationship between nature and the

happiness of the characters. When the characters seem to move away from nature, there is misery. This feature of the narrative raises the question of whether Austen had the foresight to predict that a life lived amongst and in harmony with nature was the best way to live.

In taking an ecocritical viewpoint of any text, one is usually assailed of an absence of a universally accepted view 'ecocriticism has no single, dominant world view guiding it' (Barry 259). One is also made aware of the fact that an ecocritical analysis has no single goal or set of regulations. 'There is no single methodology and no uniform purpose among ecocritics... environmental reading in different ways' (Slovic in Rangarajan, xi). As such, the study draws from Jonathan Culler, who wrote in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* that, 'for ecocriticism, the *wellbeing* of the full range of life forms, *human* and non-human, and of the environment is an end to which other purposes should answer' (127). Culler's words reveal that ecocriticism concerns itself with not only the non-human ecosystem, as is commonly misunderstood, but, also with human well-being. Austen's narrative situates the well-being (happiness) of her characters in the landscape of the countryside and not the city. This exhibits a favouritism on Austen's part towards the countryside/natural. Her narrative relates the town with misfortune and negativity, revealing a deeply entrenched hostility towards the urban/man-made.

The study explores this aspect in *Sense and Sensibility* where the landscape thus seems to be the deciding factor in determining the wellbeing of the characters. The first instance of this is seen in the first chapter, wherein Norland exerts a bitter-sweet influence on Mrs. Dashwood, as both the place of her happiness and her sorrow.

'A continuance in a place where everything reminded her of former delight was exactly what suited her mind. In seasons of cheerfulness, no temper could be more cheerful than hers, or possess, in a greater degree, that sanguine expectation of happiness which is happiness itself. But in sorrow she must be

equally carried away by her fancy, and as far beyond consolation as in pleasure she was beyond alloy'(21).

Marianne also exhibits such an attachment to the place of her childhood. Like Toru Dutt's *Casuarina Tree*, Norland is special to Marianne. On the eve of the Dashwoods' leaving, Marianne laments her separation from Norland.

'Dear, dear Norland!' said Marianne, as she wandered alone before the house, on the last evening of their being there; 'when shall I cease to regret you!-when learn to feel a home elsewhere! O happy house, could you know what I suffer in now viewing you from this spot, from whence perhaps I may view you no more! And you, ye well-known trees!-but you will continue the same' (38).

Her expressions draw comparison with another romantic of the age, John Keats whose Nightingale was not made for death: 'O immortal bird'. Norland is Marianne's immortal Nightingale, an indelible mark of her temporary being. 'No leaf will decay because we are removed, nor any branch become motionless although we can observe you no longer! No; you will continue the same: unconscious of the pleasure or the regret you occasion, and insensible of any change in those who walk under your shade! But who will remain to enjoy you?'(38). Thus, Austen has preceded both Keats and Toru Dutt in proclaiming the beauty, and emotions associated with one's surroundings. The Dashwoods' leaving of Norland causes them much sorrow '...too melancholy a disposition to be otherwise than tedious and unpleasant' (39). Thus it is evidenced that the landscape holds significance in the lives of the Dashwoods.

They are cured of their melancholic disposition only by the pleasant, fertile view of Barton Valley, their new home. 'But as they drew towards the end of it, their interest in the appearance of a country which they were to inhabit overcame their dejection, and a view of Barton Valley as they entered it gave them cheerfulness. It was a pleasant, fertile spot...' (39). the landscape is described by Austen as fertile and even entering it gives the Dashwoods

happiness. It is here that both the daughters are to find matches. The fertility of the land gives rise to fertile relationships being formed. This is the place where Edward Ferrars proposes to Elinor, this is the place where they get married, and this is also where Marianne and Colonel Brandon settle down in marital bliss. The landscape of Barton serves as the place where the two sisters and their husbands live happily ever after.

‘The whole country about them’, is described as ‘abounded in beautiful walks’ (51). ‘The high downs’, Austen says, invite the Dashwoods ‘from almost every window of the cottage to seek the exquisite enjoyment of air on their summits, were a happy alternative...’ (51). The air on the high downs signify life, and the summit signifies the highest achievement that one could hope for in life: a happiness that endures throughout one’s life.

‘They gaily ascended the downs, rejoicing...’ (51). Even though they were now without a father and were deprived of monetary assistance by John Dashwood, they *ascend* the *downs* happily, enjoying the ‘delightful sensations’ (51) which the landscape gives them. ‘Is there a felicity in the world,’ said Marianne, ‘superior to this?’ Marianne’s question is rhetorical and assertive of the one truth of nature as the supreme entity. Marianne and Margaret are even driven to resist the buffeting winds on the downs with ‘laughing delight’ (51). It is at this time that Marianne and Willoughby meet for the first time by way of a happy accident. Such happy meetings between the sisters and their beloved ones occur in the midst of nature. This can be evidenced wherein after Willoughby’s departure; the spirits of the Dashwoods are uplifted by the arrival of Edward Ferrars whom ‘they (Elinor and Marianne) meet... while on a walk in the countryside’ (90-91).

This happiness, when sourced from the landscape, from nature, proves to be genuine. But when happiness is derived from other sources, like Willoughby, for instance, whose charms capture Marianne’s and in whom she finds happiness, it leads to sadness. He softens the attachment that Marianne has for Norland. This weakening of her sensibilities towards the

place of her childhood acts as a premonition to the misery that Marianne is to undergo due to Willoughby. 'This was the season of happiness to Marianne. Her heart was devoted to Willoughby, and the fond attachment to Norland which she brought with her from Sussex was more likely to be softened than she had thought it possible before, by the charms which his society bestowed on her present home' (62).

But the person of sense, Elinor is not to be carried away by the courtship of her sister and Willoughby. Neither they nor Mrs. Jenkins nor Lady Middleton nor any other thing gives her true happiness. Norland could not be matched by any human being, nor the bond she shared with the place be made any weaker. 'Elinor's happiness was not so great. Her heart was not so much at ease, nor her satisfaction in their amusement so pure. They afforded her no companion that could make amends for what she had left behind, nor that could make her to think of Norland with less regret than ever' (62).

One finds that while the rustic scenario exerts positive influence upon the characters, the urban entities do not. This is evident Col. Brandon gets bad news from town. Avignon is a potential source of misfortune. 'Was it from Avignon? I hope it is not to say that your sister is worse?' (70). But, one finds that the town is a more potent source of bad news. But what makes this terrible is that this cannot be openly acknowledged. 'No ma'am. It came from town, and is merely a letter of business.' (70) When one speaks of the town, one must always speak of it in euphemistic terms. Even though the letter from town is a cause for concern, Colonel Brandon speaks of it as merely a matter of business, hiding the truth, no matter how bad an effect it has on him. 'But how came the hand to discompose you so much if it was only a letter of business?' (70). The Town is also portrayed mysteriously. It is like the dark, foreboding castles of the gothic novels.

Barton regrets having to leave the company, 'My own loss is great,' he continued, 'in being obliged to leave so agreeable a party...' (71) But he is powerless against the summons

of the town: 'I wish it could be so easily settled. But it is not in my power to delay my journey for one day.' (71). It is unforgiving and exacting, 'I cannot afford to lose one hour' (71).

The call from the town has dampened the mood of the party, but no blame can be put on it. 'Colonel Brandon again repeated his sorrow at being the cause of disappointing the party, but at the same time declared it to be unavoidable' (72). He reiterates his powerlessness against the bidding of the town, and he forgoes even the most delightful of company due to it. 'You are very obliging. But it is so uncertain when I may have it in my power to return, that I dare not engage for it at all.' (72). He again and again draws attention to his powerlessness. 'I assure you it is not in my power.' A similar instance is seen when Willoughby is forced to return to town 'My engagements at present' replied Willoughby confusedly, 'are of such a nature-that-I dare not flatter myself----' (82). Willoughby's departure was a 'Disappointment' to the Dashwoods but the lady in *town*, 'Mrs. Smith, exercised the privilege of riches upon a poor dependant cousin by sending' Willoughby 'on business to London' (81). Just like Colonel Brandon, he too is uncertain about his time in the town '...but I have no idea of returning to Devonshire immediately' (81). Willoughby also leaves Barton reluctantly 'and with how heavy a heart does he travel!' (83). Like Colonel Brandon, he too, 'had not the power of accepting' (83) the invitation extended by Marianne.

Barton's leaving for town is a cause of discomfort to the happy gathering. 'The complaints and lamentations which politeness had hitherto restrained, now burst forth universally; and they all agreed again and again how provoking it was to be so disappointed' (73). And to get over this, they go for a ride in the country: '...they must do something by way of being happy;' '...although happiness could only be enjoyed at Whitwell, they might procure a tolerable composure of mind by driving about the country' (73). They turn to nature for comfort, and it does not disappoint. Upon, Willoughby's leaving, it gives them Edward Ferrars. It even energises and fills Edward with happiness so that 'Edward returned to them with fresh

admiration of the surrounding country; ...exceedingly pleased him' (99). Nature appeals to everyone's tastes. To Edward, beauty in things is not enough, he must find it purposeful, and thus, he finds both beauty and utility in the nature. 'I call it a fine country---...It exactly answers my idea of a fine country, because it unites beauty with utility...' (99).

As time passes, the landscape of Barton gains a firm hold upon Edward. 'His spirits... were greatly improved; He grew more and more partial to the house and environs....He had no pleasure at Norland; he detested being in town; but either to Norland or London he must go' (103). His strong dislike of the town is brought out.

This is because the town itself has no charisma. It is only the people and the entertainments that give an excuse to be in town. Mrs.Dashwood sends her daughters to town, but it is with the ulterior motive of seeing that Marianne meets with Willoughby, her prospective son in law. 'You (Elinor and Marianne) will have much pleasure in being in London, and especially in being together; and if Elinor would ever condescend to anticipate enjoyment, she would foresee it there from a variety of sources;...' (150). To enjoy the town, one would have to have company and this enjoyment too is derived from 'sources'. 'With regard to' Elinor, the woman of sense, 'it was now a matter of unconcern whether she went to town or not...' (151). But it was not so for the infatuated Marianne. Her 'joy was almost a degree beyond happiness, so great was the perturbation of her spirits and her impatience to be gone' (151).

Marianne wants to meet Willoughby and this is why she goes to town. But there is a cruel turn of events and the joy of going to London only leads to heartbreak. '...she (Elinor) saw Marianne stretched on the bed, almost choked by grief, one letter in her hand, and two or three others lying by her.....almost screamed with agony' (172). Because Marianne took happiness in meeting Willoughby alone, and placed her trust only in him, she was miserable. Had she took delight in the landscape and trusted it, the perhaps the landscape would have kept

her happy. This has ecotheological implications as the landscape is given a divine quality. ‘Yes; why should I stay here? I came only for Willoughby’s sake. And now, who cares for me? Who regards me?’ (180). Marianne feels forsaken and lonely because her source of happiness was in a mere mortal, not the all encompassing landscape. Scott Slovic in his Editor’s Preface to Swarnalatha Rangarajan’s *Ecocriticism Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*, states that ‘everything one’s body does occurs in a spatial context’ (x). This spatial context is what is studied in this research article. Jane Austen situates specific actions of certain characters in certain contexts. In the countryside, Willoughby is the devoted lover. In the city, he is a cold distant person. Marianne is a happy girl very much in love with everything in the country, but in the city, she becomes a desolate creature who does not know what to believe anymore.

The town is always deceitful. When Little Eliza, who is under Colonel Brandon’s care, is allowed to go to the town of Bath, she elopes with Willoughby and is lost to the Colonel for eight months. Willoughby deserts her, but it is as if the town itself had ‘seduced’ the youth and innocence of the girl, and not Willoughby. The town is personified as a debaucher that preys on the virtue of all people and leaves them in desolation. Elinor hears the painful news of her beloved Edward being engaged to Lucy Steele while in town. The town; where there is less influence of nature and more of artificial, man-made entities; can only throw up misery upon misery for the Misses Dashwoods.

The resolution of all their troubles comes when the sisters return to Barton and the countryside. It is the ‘return to nature’ to quote Edward Albert, that brings joy and stability to their tumultuous lives. Brandon’s proposal to Marianne symbolizes the landscape reaching out its hand in support. And Marianne’s acceptance of Brandon is the acceptance of the landscape as their saviour. The countryside also holds good news for Elinor. She hears of Edward’s fiancée running off with his brother, thereby making him free to marry Elinor. Edward himself comes to Barton to propose to Elinor and they are married in the countryside. The conclusion,

with its focus on happy matrimonial life shows virtue and nature wedded together in a triumph of both ecological virtues.

Ecocriticism, in Rangarajan's words, takes 'a critical reconceptualisation of dichotomies like nature/culture, self/other...' (1). Rangarajan's observation is applicable to Jane Austen in terms of the rural/urban. The rustic setting is portrayed as being more favourable to the characters and the town as a hostile environment. This narrative espouses a dichotomy which has been criticized by various scholars. William Cronon in his work *Nature's Metropolis* (1991) says that the association of the urban with misery and despair comes from an ideology that separates 'human life from the ecosystems that sustain it' (8). The city and country, he believes, form not two sides, but equal parts, of the same whole. Similarly, Raymond Williams in his work *The Country and the City* (1973), in the words of Rangarajan (79) 'offers a sharp critique of writers who eulogise the countryside as an imagined Eden and revile the city, presenting it as a symbol of capitalist extraction and exploitation.' This is precisely what Willoughby has done to both Marianne and Brandon's sister: exploitation. Austen is therefore, an author typical of the affliction that Williams accuses them of having. However, it must be seen that Austen criticizes the follies and hypocrisies of the society and not the whole urban scenario. Hers is a hate that is, to borrow from D.W. Harding, 'regulated'. It is regulated towards the vices of the city, so that the urban society might also become as ethical as the rural society. She does not condemn the city-dwellers to remain in perpetual depravity. Willoughby is pardoned, so are Lucy Steele, the Dashwoods and the Ferrars. They still have time to live a life full of consideration for others. Austen's critique arises not out of spite or a misplaced sense of morality, but out of a concern for 'the *wellbeing* of the full range of life forms' (Culler 127).

The matrimony in the conclusion can be interpreted not as the human accepting the nature's hand, but of an alliance of cultural ethics and natural peace. Culler (127) in speaking about ecocriticism says 'it may explore writings about nature, how different groups treat nature

differently, or highlight celebrations of nature in order to promote ecological consciousness; or it may take on human uses of nature directly'. Austen, goes a step further from this, and weaves a yarn that stands testimony to the progressive, endearing quality of the virtuous people of the countryside and contrasts it with that of the cold-hearted unethical representatives of the town, promoting, not only a vision of a limited ecological consciousness but also, a need for an ethical vision to life no matter where one lives. The 'human use of nature' it can be said, would be for nature to be taken as a good example of God-given virtues that need to be emulated for a harmonious life. Thus, Austen is not a fanatical advocate of the rustic but an impartial advocate for just and joyful living.

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